

Committee: Overview & Scrutiny	Date: 01/10/13	Classification: Unrestricted	Report No:	Agenda Item:
Report of: Cllr Amy Whitelock, Chair of Working Group, Originating Officer(s): Vicky Allen Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer		Title: Reviewing the impact of the Children’s Centres restructure – report of the Scrutiny Working Group Progress Report Ward(s) affected: All		

1. **SUMMARY**

1.1 A scrutiny report to review the impact of the Children’s Centres restructure was taken to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2012 and a six month update report on the progress of recommendations was reviewed in April 2013. At the April meeting, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested further information on several recommendations which had not been fully implemented.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the report findings.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1 The “Reviewing the impact of the Children’s Centres review scrutiny report” went to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2012. It scrutinised the following perceptions for accuracy, given the lack of clear communications about the changes:

- That service provision has become patchy, geographically less accessible to users and offers a smaller range of services than before;
- That the move to targeting the offer to more vulnerable families has led to a reduction in universal provision which has begun to impact on community cohesion in some areas;

- Whether a reduction in back office staff has resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence; and
- That it is difficult for parents to become fully involved as key stakeholders in Children's Centres (eg. Parent Networks are not fully used).

3.2 Throughout the review it was found there was some truth to these perceptions, but the scrutiny review group welcomed the opportunity to hear from the service about how the changes were being communicated to service users and the staffing issues were being addressed. Their recommendations were aimed at addressing the outstanding issues. In following up on the review, members were particularly pleased to hear that some job descriptions had been upgraded to reflect the additional activities staff had taken on since the restructure.

3.3 The scrutiny review found that whilst some service users were unaware of the range of services available to them, in general they were very positive of the service provided and felt that their views were taken into consideration, as evidenced in the user satisfaction surveys undertaken by the services.

3.4 The report made 9 recommendations which were agreed by OSC. The body of this report outlines the progress against five recommendations where an update on further progress had been requested by OSC in at the April 2013 meeting.

4. **BODY OF REPORT**

4.1 **Recommendation 3:** The CSF Directorate to sustain and enhance the excellent service provision on offer by:

- Ensuring that there are no further cuts to funding for children's centres service
- Considering how to increase the number of sessions which are both welcoming and suitable for parents with children of different ages
- Publicising the services on offer in new Children's Centres which could alleviate the distance some families have to travel

4.2 **Recommendation 5:** The Learning and achievement Service to review job descriptions, job title and salary scale of the Office Assistants / receptionist posts, to ensure the grade is commensurate with the job activities and additional responsibilities, and recognises the front line nature of the job. Review the capacity across the service for 2012/13 and increase where necessary.

4.3 In response to the request from OSC for an update on service capacity in context of vacancy management savings, the service has responded that there continues to be no frontline service cuts to Children's Centres. However there are some vacancies that the service has been struggling to recruit to due to the suitability of candidates who have applied. These posts are being covered by agency staff - there currently is 14 agency staff that are covering maternity leave, sickness absence and vacant posts. The service would like to recruit beyond its current

structure for a data officer / office assistant position. However this has not happened because People Board has advised that it is not possible to recruit permanent positions funded by grant allocation.

- 4.4 **Recommendation 6:** Recognising the importance of robust data collection, the Learning and Achievement Service to undertake a business process improvement exercise with the aim of streamlining what data is captured and how collected, input and analysed.
- 4.5 OSC asked for an update on the service undertaking a business improvement exercise. This exercise had not been undertaken by the six month update report because the service was waiting the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection Framework in order to take these requirements into consideration. The service has advised that the Framework was published in March 2013.
- 4.6 Barking and Dagenham have been identified as employing good practice in capturing, input and analysis of data collected in Children's Centres. It is also a local authority with a high proportion of Children's Centres which receive 'outstanding' Ofsted outcomes. Two of the borough's Locality Leads are currently working with their equivalents in Barking and Dagenham, and will be implementing their findings during the course of the financial year.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 8:** Whilst recognising the importance of traditional methods of communication, and the cut in the advertising budget, the Learning and Achievement Service to improve and expand communications to parents by:
- Increasing the use of creative communications such as e-mail, text and social media as an efficient and cost effective way of communicating with parents.
 - Using Parent Forums to review both printed communications and that which is displayed within Children's Centres, in order to ensure they communicate clearly the entire offer to both children and parents, including adults' service and children's sessions for mixed ages.
 - Widening the reach of written publicity to include more venues such as doctor's surgeries, school noticeboards and chemists.
- 4.8 OSC asked for an update on the findings of the review being conducted with the Parents Forum on accessibility of information relating to the service. The service has reported that this is an on-going activity which has been embedded into the work of the individual Children's Centres Parent Forums by the way of a standing agenda item. Each Children's Centre hears the views of its Parent Forum with regard to communications and takes action where appropriate and representative. The annual user satisfaction survey is also used by service managers to understand satisfaction with communication methods. To ensure that the style and content of written communications are accessible, they are always checked by the Family Support Service prior to being sent.

- 4.9 There is a wide coverage of publicity relating to Children's Centres around the community, and where there is a need identified, publicity is sent to that venue. However there is no capacity within the service to regularly audit the publicity in the community. There continues to be a buy-in of the expertise of the Family Support Service and there is on-going work to find ways of aligning Forums with the Parent Council.
- 4.10 **Recommendation 9:** The Learning and Achievement Service to facilitate the engagement of a wide range of parents in governance by:
- Providing a programme of training for Community Development Workers and other staff as appropriate, to become capable and confident facilitators of Parents Forums who can recruit and support a range of parents to become involved.
 - Providing a programme of training and capacity-building for parents, including understanding of their role and responsibilities within the governance model, with a particular focus on those less likely to come forward for such positions.
 - Ensuring the Governance Model is user friendly and not unduly bureaucratic.
- 4.11 In response to the request by OSC for an update on the governance model for Children's Centres after one year of operation, the service has reported that this is secure in three of the four localities. There has been less progress in the North-West locality mainly due to long term sickness, however this work is now getting back on track.
- 4.12 Within this model, the service is looking at the make-up of Parent Forums and also an exit strategy for parents who have been actively engaged but whose children are about to leave the Children's Centre environment.
- 4.13 The service undertakes a Children's Centres partner visit programme, internally led with external support. These are similar to a mock Ofsted inspection focusing both on the quality of provision and the satisfaction and engagement of users. These reviews found the Children's Centres to be good / outstanding.

5. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

- 5.1 This report describes the progress with the recommendations of the review of the restructure of children's centres that was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2012.
- 5.2 The Council's funding from central government has been reduced since 2010-11 and will continue to reduce over the next five years as identified in the Council's Medium term Financial Plan (MTFP). This will therefore affect any recommendations agreed and any additional costs that arise from the recommendations must be contained within directorate revenue budgets, specifically: recommendations R3 further funding for Children's Services; R5 to fill vacant posts permanently in the service. Consequently, officers will be obliged

to seek the appropriate financial approval before further financial commitments are made.

6. CONCURRENT REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (LEGAL)

- 6.1 The Council is required by section 9F of the Local Government Act 2000 to have an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to have executive arrangements that ensure the committee has specified powers. Consistent with this obligation, Article 6 of the Council's Constitution provides that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may consider any matter affecting the area or its inhabitants and may make reports and recommendations to the Full Council or the Executive in connection with the discharge of any functions. It is consistent with the Constitution and the statutory framework for the Executive to provide a response. It is reasonable for the Committee to be provided with updates on any agreed action plan.

7. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 Children's Centres play a key role in delivering the One Tower Hamlets principles because their core offer, as outlined by the government, is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness. The value of children mixing with other from different backgrounds and communities is viewed as positive by service users.

8. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

- 8.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the report.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising from the report. Risks relating to the recommendations will be monitored through the council's corporate risk register and directorate risk registers. Risks are assessed for likelihood and impact, and will have responsible owners and programmes mitigating actions.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no direct implications of crime and disorder as a result of the recommendations of this review.

11. EFFICIENCY STATEMENT

- 11.1 One of the objectives of the review was to test the claim that the reduction in back office staff had resulted in frontline staff having to undertake administrative activities, and spending less time with service users as a consequence.
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**Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)
List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report**

Brief description of “background papers”	Name and telephone number of holder and address where open to inspection.
None	N/A

12. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Scrutiny Review and Action Plan
